

Tree of Life Church
October 6, 2024—Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost
Breathing Underwater: Spirituality and The Twelve Steps

#1 We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON Isaiah 38:12-14

My dwelling is plucked up and removed from me
like a shepherd's tent;
like a weaver I have rolled up my life;
he cuts me off from the loom;
from day to night you bring me to an end;
I cry for help until morning;
like a lion he breaks all my bones;
from day to night you bring me to an end.

Like a swallow or a crane I clamour,
I moan like a dove.

My eyes are weary with looking upwards.
O Lord, I am oppressed; be my security!

LETTERS Romans 7:15, 18

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.

GOSPEL Matthew 9:36

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

SERMON Powerlessness AA Step #1 Rev. M. Courtenay Willcox

Step #1: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Please pray with me.

You see included in your bulletin a schedule of three weeks diving into Richard Rohr's book, *Breathing Underwater: Spirituality and The Twelve Steps* and into three of the Alcoholics Anonymous steps. This series is a glimpse both into AA and into Richard Rohr's book. The book was presented in its nascent form decades ago when Rohr gave talks that linked the wisdom of the Twelve Step Program with what St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) called "the marrow of the Gospel,"¹ which simply put, according to St. Francis, is the Franciscan way of spending one's life living out the Gospel. Living according to what we read in scripture, is where the Gospel meets the Twelve Steps through Rohr's heart and words. We will come to see that the Twelve Step Program "parallels, mirrors, and makes practical the same messages that Jesus gave us." Here are the words that bring

¹ Rohr, Richard. *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps* (p. 14). Franciscan Media. Kindle Edition.

together the two philosophies: We suffer to get well. We surrender to win. We die to live. We give it away to keep it.²

My sermons in this October series will be deeply grounded in the book and the steps.

I'm so very grateful to Steve Schmidt who helped educate me just a bit on AA and has lined up some AA members who will be sharing their story with us. I'm grateful for his time and insight, and for those sharing their story.

Rohr reflects that "Twelve Steppers" sometimes think they have left the church when they attend Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings, in our case, in Boggs Hall or downstairs, while, at the same time, many of us here in the sanctuary believe that **our** "higher" concerns are something different from "those people with problems" down the hall. It is clear, however, that messages between the two teachings parallel one another, and they assure us that we are dealing with inspiration from the Holy Spirit that comes from the same collective unconscious. Rohr believes Jesus' Gospel message and Bill Wilson, aka Bill W's Steps, are essentially the same message. Like Rohr in his book, I will quote "Bill W." as the author of the Twelve Steps and the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, even as I am aware there is doubt as to who exactly wrote what.³

Let me dive in here and say that while my addictions are not with alcohol, I fully relate to our Roman's text that says, I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the very things I want to do and find myself doing the very things I hate ... for although the will to do what is good is in me, the power to do it is not. (Romans 7:15, 18)

Step 1 of the Twelve Steps says, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable."

In Rohr's chapter on powerlessness. He says "I must be upfront with you. I do not really understand why God created the world this way. I do not know why "power is at its best in weakness," as Paul wrote, or "it is when I am weak that I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). It sure seems like God is some kind of trickster" he continues. "Perhaps the Divine is playing games with us. God seems to have hidden holiness and wholeness in a secret place where only the humble will find it. Some topsy-turvy God has decided that those on the bottom will be revealed as the true top, and those who try for the top will find nothing of substance there. Why such a disguise? Why such a game of hide-and-seek?"⁴

Let's enter into this conversation. To do so, I want to recount a recent conversation by Kate Bowler, who speaks to this very sense of powerlessness in an interview with Rainn Wilson. I've talked about Kate numerous times, she is a theologian, author, Duke Divinity School professor, podcaster and is living with stage 4 colon cancer. She talks about doing everything right, working so hard to overcome all obstacles in her path, and wanting to sit in the life she had labored so hard for and loved. She says, "And then I got a phone call that said it was stage 4 cancer and that I would have to go to the hospital right away. I was in this lovely dress that I had just been teaching in, and I could

² IBID, pp. 11-12.

³ IBID

⁴ IBID, p. 28.

feel right away that a life I loved was over...and that this was really kind of end to a set of very lovely, well-earned delusions that I had about myself.”⁵

This realization of her own inability to alter her circumstance, no matter how hard she worked at it, is the same thing that Rohr affirms is the essential and difficult task of admitting to our own powerlessness, but who wants to admit to or even acknowledge their inability to control their lives? While recognition of our own powerlessness is universal, coming to terms with our inability to control our circumstances is a different positioning all together. We can see or recognize powerlessness in circumstances of health, dis-ease, addiction, mental illness, relationships, accident, raising children, and any circumstances that we can't control.

Many teachers of the Twelve Steps have said this first Step of acknowledging our own powerlessness is probably the hardest, most denied, and most avoided. Letting go of control isn't in anybody's program for happiness, and yet, are you ready for this? All mature spirituality is about letting go and unlearning.

Jesus uses metaphors of a “grain of wheat” (John 12:24) or a “branch cut off from the vine” (John 15:2) to describe the arrogant ego, our arrogant ego. And while Paul used the word “flesh,” which makes most people think he is talking about the body, both Jesus and Paul are pointing to the isolated and protected small self, our egos, and both said the ego has to go. Our ego's concerns are small and selfish and its response is always **an** inadequate or even wrong response to the moment. The ego's response will not deepen or broaden life, love, or inner peace. Because it has no inner substance, our ego self is always attached to things that are external. The ego defines itself by its attachments and revulsions, things it hates and disparages. The soul does not attach, nor does it hate; it desires and loves and lets go. It is not stuck and it embraces the freedom of love, when we choose to love someone, even someone we don't necessarily like, it frees us of attachments and revulsions.

What the ego hates more than anything else is to change—even when the present situation isn't working or is horrible. While some might say, oh, now I see how this applies to someone with an addiction, they just keep using and using and doing more and more of what does **not** work. But, I will say here, so do we all, so do we all.

Change, even when our current actions are destructive to us or another, is difficult. English poet W. H. Auden wrote, “We would rather be ruined than changed, / We would rather die in our dread / Than climb the cross of the moment / And let our illusions die.”⁶

Rabbi Rami Shapiro names the paradox of powerlessness and surrender to God. He says,

The fundamental and paradoxical premise of Twelve Step recovery as I experience it is this: The more clearly you realize your lack of control, the more powerless you discover yourself to be... [and] the more natural it is for you to be surrendered to God. The more surrendered to God you become, the less you struggle against the natural flow of life. The less you struggle against the flow of life, the

⁵ <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/everything-happens-with-kate-bowler/id1341076079>

⁶ Selected from Richard Rohr, [Breathing under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps](#), 10th anniv. ed. (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2011, 2021), 5–6; W. H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 105.

freer you become. Radical powerlessness is radical freedom, liberating you from the need to control the ocean of life and freeing you to learn how best to navigate it...⁷

The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous presents the A.A. program for recovery from alcoholism. It was first published in 1939, to show other alcoholics how the first 100 people of A.A. got sober. Now translated into over 70 languages, it is still considered A.A.'s basic text. In this book, in the chapter entitled "How it Works," we hear a response to the powerlessness we all feel. "This is the how and the why of it. First of all, we had to quit playing God. It didn't work."⁸

We are all addicted to control; we want to be in control. This is the addiction that we all share. Ceding control, whether in AA or as a Christian or as a Christian in AA, is a practice. It is not a once-and-done exercise but a practice of letting go that we must exercise over and over again. The deepest truth of Step 1, and our Christian faith as well, requires us to admit that we are powerless over our lives, and that life itself is unmanageable.^{9 10} We let go, and let God, returning to the mantra, We suffer to get well. We surrender to win. We die to live. We give it away to keep it.¹¹ Amen.

⁷ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-grace-of-powerlessness/>

⁸ https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/en_bigbook_chapt5.pdf, p 62.

⁹ Rami Shapiro, Recovery, the Sacred Art: The Twelve Steps as Spiritual Practice (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2009), 3, 6

¹⁰ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-grace-of-powerlessness/>

¹¹ Rohr, Richard. Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps, pp. 11-12.